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Abstract

This article describes interactional features of an interrogation method that is used by law enforcement and private security companies in the US known as the 'soft accusation' method. We demonstrate how the method, in contrast to the more common 'story solicitation' method, makes use of a 'telling about oneself' activity to actually suppress a subject's talk by setting up and maintaining an exceptionally long turn by the interrogator. This turn not only constrains subjects' speaking contributions to the issuing of continuers and acknowledgments, and, as such, their opportunities to challenge or resist, but, based as it is on 'telling about oneself', re-organizes the knowledge differential to one in which it is the interrogator rather than the subject who has primary epistemic rights of disclosure. We provide an overview of interactional problems associated with the story solicitation method and then consider how the soft accusation method is designed to counter them, particularly via practices of informing and describing that are associated with the activity of 'telling about oneself'. As we show, these practices make use of techniques of elaboration that provide a resource for turn expansion, as well as for seamless topical movement that works to positively align the subject to the interrogator's talk and, thus, to smooth the interactional pathway to the subject's admission of guilt.

Keywords

alignment, conversation analysis, description, elaborations, hypothetical talk, interrogation, topic shift

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In this article, we describe features of the interactional organization of an interrogation method that is used by law enforcement and private security companies in the US. It is a method that is disseminated through a large number of workshops and seminars held weekly across the country, and through the sale of books and videos. The method is a highly standardized (i.e. scripted) technique of interrogation known as the ‘soft accusation’ method. It is a method that avoids a direct accusation in favor of other moves that indirectly implicate a subject¹ in wrongful activity.

We discuss here what has struck us as one of the method’s most defining features: that is, that the interrogator speaks vastly more than does the subject. Contrary to the common wisdom that advises people to ‘keep their mouths shut’ if ever questioned about their knowledge or involvement in criminal activity – the idea being that an interrogation is designed to get people to talk – this is a method that in fact works to *keep* people *from* talking. We note that talking is just what another method, the very common ‘story solicitation’ method (as in, ‘we want your side of the story’ or ‘tell us what happened’), is designed to do get people to do. However, in giving subjects speaking rights to tell a story, this method turns over to them an extended turn at talk and grants them epistemic authority to shape event details that put them in the ‘best light’ (Kidwell, 2009), and that resist interrogator accusation and challenge (Komter, 2003; Shuy, 1998; Watson, 1990). In contrast, the soft accusation method, in constraining a subject’s occasions to speak, works to circumvent opportunities for subject resistance, and in this way, construct a smoother interactional pathway to a subject’s admission of guilt.

Of particular interest to us is a key phase of the interrogation in which the interrogator begins with an utterance such as:

Extract 1: Janitor

IR: °Alright° (0.4) uhm (.) <lemme just tell
ya (.) a li:ttle bi:t (.) uhm (.) about
myse:lf.

and – with virtually no input from the subject except in the form of continuers and acknowledgments (‘mh hm’, ‘yeah’, etc.) – ends several minutes later (10 to 26 minutes in our data) in what is a virtual monologue with:

IR: ↑ Lemme ask you this Peter.
(0.3)
S: mh h[m.
IR: [When is the very first time you
took somethin’ from someone’s apartment.
I mean .hh was it in the first year
that you started workin’ here?

We leave aside a full consideration of the accusatory question in this article, except to note that it is a canonical ‘loaded question’: it contains a presupposition of wrongdoing by the subject (carried across two questions) that has not already been mutually established

by both participants as being in fact true. The lexical-grammatical constraints of the question intently push for an answer from the subject that will confirm this presupposition. What we demonstrate in this article is that the long turn at talk by the interrogator that is launched by ‘let me tell you about myself’, and that precedes the question, does a great deal of work to ready the subject to accept the question’s presupposition, and thus to make an admission. A fairly routine observation about interrogations is that subjects are not inclined to admit guilt unless they believe they are caught, that the interrogator has something ‘on them’ (Komter, 2003; Shuy, 1998). With the activity of ‘telling about oneself’, the interrogator establishes that he already has knowledge of the subject’s wrongdoing, specifically by using ‘telling about oneself’ over the course of a single long turn to persistently (even relentlessly) convey that he has this knowledge, but – critically – in such a way that only implies the matter, and that, as a result, does not make interactionally relevant denial or challenge by the subject.

In proceeding, we provide an overview of interactional problems associated with the story solicitation method, and then we examine how the soft accusation method works to circumvent these problems, especially in the way it uses the ‘telling about oneself activity’ to handle such issues as problem forecasting, tellership, and participants’ knowledge differentials. We consider these issues with respect to how the ‘telling about oneself’ activity is initially set up in the soft accusation encounter, and then how the activity, based as it is on practices of informing and describing, employs techniques of elaboration as a resource for topical movement, and thus turn expansion. These techniques work to not only extend and prolong the project of making a case against the subject, but to also positively align subjects to claims that are embedded in the elaborations that implicate them in wrongdoing.

Background

There is an extensive body of critical research on police interrogations, particularly as these result in false confessions, but this research has not been concerned with language use as it unfolds in moment-by-moment interaction. This research takes issue with ‘coercive’ interrogation techniques, such as presenting suspects with false evidence against them, holding them for exceptionally long hours of questioning, and minimizing the nature and consequences of what they have been charged with (Kassin and Gudjonsson, 2004, 2005; Russano et al., 2005). While occasionally the methods of direct observation have been used (Leo, 1996), mostly this research employs an experimental and theoretical paradigm, and is concerned primarily with such matters as the situational and psychological circumstances under which people falsely confess (Gudjonsson et al., 2004); police predetermination of a suspect’s guilt based on the detection of so-called ‘deception cues’ (Kassin et al., 2007); and the actual difficulties of really being able to detect deception in others (Ekman, 1985, 1989; Ekman and O’Sullivan, 1991; Kassin and Fong, 1999). In contrast, our research approach, in line with other conversation analytic research on interrogation (Edwards, 2006; Haworth, 2006; Heydon, 2005; Ho Shon, 2008; Komter, 2003; Stokoe, 2009; Stokoe and Edwards, 2008; Watson, 1990), focuses on the interrogation as a speech event, and the publicly observable arrangements and fit of participants’ actions as the main object of inquiry. By asking ‘how do they do that?’

through and within talk, we seek to explicate how talk itself is used to structure the sort of interrogation situation under examination here, in particular, how various conversational moves set up and constrain participants' activities and provide for certain sorts of outcomes.

Data and method

Our data consist of 12 video and audio tapes comprising about 15 hours of data. We have seven private investigation interrogation tapes that make use of the soft accusation method, and five police criminal interrogations that make use of the story solicitation method. The subjects in the private investigation interrogations are employees of companies, and the interrogators are representatives of a private security firm. In the criminal interrogations, a police officer is interrogating a subject who has been formally charged with a crime. In the private sector interrogations, no official charges have been made against the subject, and, as is one of the points of this article, the interrogation is designed to *not* appear to be an interrogation at all. Our use of the term 'interrogation' derives from how the term is officially used by the trainers and developers of the method, and by the people who use it as part of their jobs in public law enforcement (we do not have data from these situations) and private security. As a related matter, we note that, like interrogations that are officially formulated as such, the soft accusation method shares as its main institutional objective securing an admission of guilt by a subject (Shuy, 1998).

In the private sector interrogations, the subject is brought to a room at their place of work. The interrogation typically lasts an hour; the script on which it is based has in fact been designed to take about an hour. In all of our private sector cases, the subjects make an admission of guilt. In the criminal investigations, the interrogations take place in a room at a police station. None of the subjects in these criminal cases admit to the charges against them, but rather deny them outright, or admit only to lesser offenses.

While it may seem problematic to use data from such different data sources (i.e. criminal vs private security) to compare the soft accusation and story solicitation methods, we note that the methods can, and are, used in both types of settings. Our goal in bringing the story solicitation data into the article is to provide an empirical point of contrast with features of the soft accusation method that we think are not setting-specific, but rather specific to the interactional arrangements of the two methods.

We have changed the names of all persons who appear in the tapes. The data have been transcribed in accord with conversation analytic conventions (see Appendix).

A point of contrast: The 'story solicitation' method of interrogation

As discussed above, one common way that interrogations proceed is for an interrogator to solicit a story from a subject (Jönsson and Linell, 1991; Watson, 1990). In the following case, the subject (S) has been brought to an interrogation room and read her Miranda rights. After some initial biographical inquiry by the interrogator (IR), and brief referencing of the event for which S is being questioned ('there was an incident that happened . . .'), IR solicits a story:

Extract 2: North City Stabbing

- 1 IR: =We want your side of the story
 2 cause all we have is his right now,
 ((2 lines deleted; IR makes reference to stabbing))
 5 and you played a major ro:le in
 6 what ha::ppened there. (0.5) Alright?=
 7 S: =.hh I- I started to run
 8 cause I got like nervous:,
 9 IR: → <Okay yeah that's understanda[ble
 10 S: [(cause)
 11 that's all I do: I ru:n and I start
 12 cry:ing and I don't even know what
 13 to do. (.).hh [.hh
 14 IR: → [Okay I understan[d.
 15 S: [That
 16 ni:ght I was coming from my cousin's
 17 hou:se
 18 IR: → O[kay
 19 S: [on the bi:ke and it was rai:ning,
 20 IR: → Yeah,

IR's actions prompt a description of an event by S as a chronologically ordered series of constituent events, to which IR aligns as a story recipient through the use of continuers, acknowledgments, and evaluations:

- 7 S: =.hh I- I started to run
 8 cause I got like nervous:,
 9 IR: → <Okay yeah that's understanda[ble
 10 S: [(cause)
 11 that's all I do: I ru:n and I start
 12 cry:ing and I don't even know what
 13 to do. (.).hh [.hh
 14 IR: → [Okay I understan[d.
 15 S: [That
 16 ni:ght I was coming from my cousin's
 17 hou:se
 18 IR: → O[kay
 19 S: [on the bi:ke and it was rai:ning,
 20 IR: → Yeah,

As a first point, the story solicitation method locates at the outset, in the format of the solicitation itself and in the legal activities and talk that lead up to it, a problem: 'We want your side of the story', and 'what ha::ppened' (lines 1 and 6) are formulations that index an event as an 'incident' and seek an account (Kidwell, 2009). In this case, IR articulates as well that there are other competing versions (with 'your side' and 'all we have is his'; lines 1 and 2) that claim an independent line of evidence had by IR.

As a second matter, the method sets up one person to be a 'teller' about an event, and the other to be a recipient, and in this way provides subjects an extended turn at talk, while the interrogator (at least initially) minimizes his own talk contributions (Sacks, 1974, 1978). Such a format provides subjects an opportunity to formulate a version of events that puts them in the 'best light', that is, one that minimizes their culpability in a situation. In the case above, S starts her story by removing herself from the scene ('I started to run', line 7; 'I ru:n', line 11), itself a potentially discrediting act (i.e. that she runs because she is guilty), which she accounts for with descriptions of her emotional state (and thus intent in the situation) as distraught and disoriented ('I start cry:ing'; 'I don't even know what to do'; lines 11–13). In these ways, S positions herself from the start to be a victim rather than a wrongdoer in relation to story events; as we see, IR aligns to S's moves with sympathetic acknowledgments, like 'that's understandable'

(lines 9, 14). S then begins a story proper ('That ni:ght'; Sacks, 1974) by backtracking to an earlier, mundane detail of her actions preceding the problem event ('... I was coming from my cousin's hou:se'; lines 16, 17), which she uses as a technique of backgrounding and building up to the 'incident' (not shown). Such a technique of storytelling (especially common in 'what happened?' solicited stories) portrays a teller as someone who was going about the most ordinary of activities when an 'extraordinary' event befalls them, in this way casting the teller as innocent of premeditation with respect to the untoward turn of events (Kidwell, 2009).

As a third important matter, the story solicitation also sets up a clear knowledge differential. The interrogator claims to have one side of the story (the victim's), but he does not have subject's side (lines 1 and 2). Thus, the interrogator positions himself as both a *knowing* and *unknowing* recipient: one with some access to story events, but only secondary access (Goodwin, 1981; Pomerantz, 1980; Sacks, 1974, 1978). In the role of recipient, the interrogator – while issuing continuers and the like – also monitors the story for its accuracy and plausibility, and interjects with clarifying questions, challenges, and other manner of institutionally motivated talk related to the task of getting the subject to admit to wrongdoing (Heydon, 2005; Jönsson and Linell, 1991; Komter, 2003; Watson, 1990). Participants' differential access to the event that is being 'storied', however, presents a certain sort of a dilemma for the interrogator in carrying out this task.

A main related problem, of course, is that the interrogator and subject are typically working at cross-purposes: while it is in the interests of the interrogator to get an admission and/or information that could incriminate the subject, it is not in the interests of the subject to provide such. Thus, the story solicitation method typically works not by subjects readily disclosing what they 'really' experienced or perceived in a situation (i.e. the 'truth'), but rather works by the interrogator being able to identify inconsistencies in subjects' stories and using them to leverage an admission and/or other useful information (Komter, 2003). Interrogators monitor for, and use as a basis for challenge, such things as 'internal' inconsistencies in story details proffered by the subject (as when one detail contradicts another); contradictions in story details with independent evidence (i.e. in the form of witness testimony and/or physical evidence); and, especially powerfully, contradictions with what might be considered a real world, known-in-common logic about how events, plausibly, unfold. In other words, does what the subject says make sense?

However, returning to the third point, in monitoring for and designing challenges to subjects' story inconsistencies, interrogators are constrained by a fundamental epistemic problem: it is subjects who were at the scene and experienced the event, not the interrogator. As such, it is subjects who have primary 'rights of access' to tell what happened (Komter, 2003; Lynch and Bogen, 1996; Pomerantz, 1980; Raymond and Heritage, 2006; Watson, 1990; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1990). Indeed, it can be interactionally difficult to dislodge subjects from their versions of story events, as we see throughout our story solicitation data, even in the face of aggravated challenge by the interrogator. Subjects may steadfastly maintain their versions, and, as we see in the following extract from another case, make a strong display of their epistemic advantage in doing so:

Extract 3: North City Robbery

- 1 IR: You know that none a' THA:T makes
 2 se[nse. Right?
 3 S: [(yeah)
 4 S: → Whatever as long as- doesn't make
 5 sense that's what ↑ happened,
 6 IR: HOW. EXPLAIN TO ME how that happens.
 7 S: → I jus: ex plai:n ed to you how it happened.

Here, IR rejects the plausibility of S's prior claims in their entirety ('none a' THA:T makes sense'; lines 1–2). IR's evaluation of S's claims are particularly aggravated: he does not follow the rules of preference structure for mitigating disagreement, but, with amplified volume, evaluates S's claims as nonsensical outright, impugning without qualification S's truthfulness (Pomerantz, 1984). S flippantly dismisses IR's actions with 'Whatever' (lines 4–5), and counters that (i.e. in spite of the implausibility of his account) that is how events transpired; then, he refuses subsequent moves by IR to get him to provide a more believable, 'sensible' version (line 7). Implicitly warranting S's actions is his orientation to his own primary rights of access to the situation and how these override IR's claims that his story 'doesn't make sense'. Indeed, in this segment and throughout this interrogation, S's demeanor can only be described as 'smug' with respect to his avowal that events transpired as he says they did in the face of IR's mounting challenges and anger and frustration toward him.

In sum, the story solicitation method locates from the start a problem event and seeks from the subject an account of what transpired. In so doing, the method hands over to subjects the opportunity to construct a story that portrays them in relatively advantageous ways. Contributing to this dilemma for interrogators is that the story solicitation method positions the interrogator as having only limited access to the event. In spite of challenges that use as a basis other forms of access (that include witness testimony, physical evidence, and a 'what everyone knows' logic), interrogators typically face a difficult task in dislodging subjects from their versions of events.

What we examine next is how the soft accusation method seeks to circumvent problems that are endemic to the story solicitation method via a structure that uses 'telling about oneself' to organize problem forecasting, tellership, and, especially, participant knowledge differentials in quite distinct ways.

The soft accusation interrogation

A first point of contrast with the story solicitation method that is immediately of note is that the 'telling about oneself' activity that is the basis of the method is, at least as it is initially formulated, a relatively innocuous one. While the story solicitation method locates a problem at the outset through the backgrounding of the problem event (e.g. arrest, reading of Miranda Rights, etc. in criminal cases), and through the use of problem formulations such as 'what happened?', or 'we want your side of the story', 'telling about oneself' keeps the problem below the surface of the interaction, and constrains

subjects from finding its relevance for them – and thus of speaking to it – until the very end of the turn when the accusatory question is asked. Indeed, ‘telling about oneself’ is an activity that is set up and managed in the earliest phases of the encounter as part of an overarching strategy of conveying that the encounter will be about one thing, when it will turn out to be about something else. A recurrent characteristic of a variety of law-related interactions (e.g. courtroom testimony and pretrial hearings) is the ‘plurality and entanglement’ of activities (González-Martínez, 2006). In these contexts, one activity often serves as a vehicle and a cover for other activities related to accusation and defense (Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Drew, 1992; Lynch and Bogen, 1996).

The interrogator comes to be telling about himself in the soft accusation method as part of a series of well-laid out activity phases that are integral to paving the way to the accusatory question, but without looking like that is what is going on. We present a brief overview of these phases:

1. Pre-encounter

As part of setting up the encounter, the subject is told by a supervisor that there is someone who wants to talk to him or her about company business, and is taken to a room to meet this person.

2. Openings + reason for the encounter

Introductions are made. After initial greetings and offerings of pleasantries by the interrogator (who is usually introduced by the supervisor with first and last name), he provides a ‘reason for the encounter’, one that is consistent with the theme of discussing company business. In the following extract, this is formulated as talking about ‘operational issues’ (line 17):

Extract 4: Accountant, 14–18

- 14 IR: >I’m gonna go over< a couple things
 15 he:re (0.2) talkin to a: (.) >few
 16 dif’rent people here at work [about<
 17 → some operational issues
 18 S: [Okay.

As can be seen, IR works to underscore the relatively non-serious nature of his meeting with S and the discussion to come, particularly through the choice of quantifiers. ‘>I’m gonna go over< a **couple** things he:re’, and ‘talkin to a: (.) >**few** dif’rent people’ (lines 14–16) present the business to be taken up as minor, as part of the ordinary and routine flow of company-related activities in which not just S, but fellow workers, are taking part.

3. Preliminaries

As a next activity, IR does not turn to the discussion of ‘company operations’ that has been projected, but rather initiates a series of preliminary tasks that explicitly put this

discussion on hold through the use of ‘preliminary markers’, as in ‘before we do X’. As one preliminary activity, IR verifies S’s basic biographical information (spelling of name, age, address, etc.). As a second preliminary activity, IR instructs S to produce a bit of self-disclosure (lines 136, 137), which he does as part of setting up and projecting his own self-disclosure as a prominent order of upcoming business (132–5):

Extract 5: Accountant, 132–7

132 IR: And I’m gonna be throwing you quite
 133 a bi:t (.)hh you know about myse:lf
 134 and what it is I do who I am, that
 135 kinda thing. (0.5) Uhm (0.3).hh
 136 → **Before we do that**, (0.4) tell me: (.)
 137 somethin’ about yourself.

Of note, IR has put to work a neat little reciprocal self-disclosure activity: IR projects that he will tell about himself, including about his job, and, moreover, that he will tell a great deal (‘I’m gonna be throwing you **quite a bi:t** (.)hh you know about myse:lf and what it is I do’; lines 132–4); then he invites S to do the same, but in a more minimal way (‘tell me: **some**thin’ about yourself’) (Antaki et al., 2005; see Stokoe, 2009). As such, the matter of acquaintanceship is made explicit early in the encounter, meaning that whatever the discussion of company operations will entail, getting to know one another better is somehow part of it. The move works to set a more personal tone for the encounter, and to create a level of familiarity that will license IR’s later implicit claims to access about S’s circumstances, motivations, and involvement in wrongful activities (Hopper, 1992).

4. Interrogator self-disclosure

Following the preliminary tasks, IR turns to the project of telling about himself. To consider is that he does so in a way that positions the activity in the slot that has been set up and prepared for as the reason for the encounter, that is, a discussion of company operations. Here is the excerpt from the case of above as it follows from the preliminary activity of S’s self-disclosure:

Extract 6: Accountant, 349–59

349 IR: =right.
 350 S: [We close
 351 IR: [()]
 352 S: out that month and=
 353 IR: =issue P and L’s that ki[nd of thing
 354 S: [right.
 355 IR: >°okay°<
 356 S: °hm°

357 (0.5)
 358 →IR: uhm >let me tell you a little bit<
 359 about myse:lf

With ‘right.’ and ‘>°okay°<’ (lines 349, 355), IR works to close down the prior preliminary activity (subject self-disclosure) and to initiate the new one, ‘let me tell you . . . about myse:lf’ (Beach, 1993; Gardner, 2001). A bit of silence separates the two activities, and there is no marking of the new activity as preliminary (line 357). In this way, the activity is turned to as the business that was set up early on as the ‘reason for the encounter’, the discussion of company business, that has been pending as each preliminary was taken up and worked through. While the move might be heard by S as yet another that holds at bay the discussion of company business (Schegloff, 1980), it in fact turns out to be the discussion, but a completely one-sided one. IR, having projected that he would be talking to S about company operations, subsumes matters of this topic – which S might be reasonably presumed to know something about – as an integral facet of his own territory of personal knowledge, experience, and expertise, a point we take up next. In this way, IR has drawn S in as a participant in one sort of activity that implicates his or her involvement as a particular sort of co-participant with potential rights and obligations over a certain territory of knowledge, but ‘switched it out’, so to speak, with an activity that will severely restrict how he or she may participate and make speaking and knowledge contributions in the encounter.

We do not discuss in this article the activity phases that follow from *interrogator self-disclosure*, except to say that it leads the way to the accusatory question, following which are phases that involve *developing subject’s admission*, *getting a written confession*, and a *closing*.

‘Let me tell you about myself’

Consider again the launching of the ‘telling about one’s self’ activity, of which two cases have now been presented:

Extract 1: Janitor

IR: °Alright° (0.4) uhm (.) <lemme just tell
 ya (.) a li:ttle bi:t (.) uhm (.) about
 myse:lf.

Extract 6: Accountant

IR: uhm >let me tell you a little bit<
 about myse:lf

Activity prefacing

A first point about the activity is that it is activity-prefaced. IR’s utterance, ‘let me . . . tell you about myself’, forecasts the activity that is to follow and works to frame upcoming talk as constituting this activity. In short, it readies S to be a certain sort of participant,

and to attend to what follows as part of, as being in the service of, IR's self-disclosure (Lerner, 1992; Sacks, 1974; Schegloff, 1980).

The activity preface provides an immediate point of contrast with the story solicitation method and the issues of problem forecasting, tellership, and participant knowledge differentials. First, the preface, in conjunction with the reason for the encounter offered earlier, works to promote a benign purpose to the meeting and to conceal that there is a problem. As a second important matter, the preface sets up an extended turn at talk for IR, one in which S will, typically, suspend his or her own contributions to the talk, except in the form of continuers, acknowledgments, and perhaps questions of clarification, and/or repair initiations (Jefferson, 1978; Sacks, 1974, 1978; Sacks et al., 1974; also Lerner, 1992). As such, IR carves out an interactional space in which to pursue and press over time his project of making a case against S via an activity format that minimizes S's talk contributions. Finally, as a third matter, the preface, in partitioning IR and S into teller and recipient, reorganizes the sort of knowledge differential that we find in the story solicitation method to one in which 'primary rights of access', and thus rights to disclose with authority on a topic, shift from S to IR. In other words, in matters of 'telling about oneself', teller has clear and unequivocal authority over the domains of knowledge and experience associated with self-disclosure.

But a question remains: what does IR say and do over the course of what turns out to be an extraordinarily long turn at talk to align and prepare S for the accusatory question, and the presuppositions of S's wrong doing that it contains?

Hypothetically speaking

A key technique by IR involves using the 'telling about oneself' activity frame to tell about his job and the activities associated with it, especially those having to do with surveillance and the techniques of locating and apprehending wrongdoers. Here is one excerpt:

Extract 7: Pickup Dock, 103–13

- 103 IR: Y' know we- **we can** virtually (0.2) watch
 104 any inch of this entire warehouse
 105 the parking lot or anywhere else.
 106 **We use** cameras that have pinhole
 107 ↑len:ses which (0.3) really the lens
 108 is about the si:ze.hh of this ↑pen
 109 here. ((shows S a pen))
 110 S: °mh hm°=
 111 IR: =and **you can** put it in false cei:lings,
 112 **you can** put it up in ra:fters, in
 113 bo:xes, (.) uhm **you can- wherever**.

Similar to the story solicitation method, IR articulates that he has, or has the techniques for getting, something 'on' someone, indeed, anyone. However, the sort of evidence that he claims is available to him grants him not partial or secondary access to

events, but *complete* access. The techniques he describes invoke an environment of constant total monitoring in which sophisticated technologies of surveillance (i.e. cameras with pinhole lenses; lines 106, 107) are deployed in surreptitious and pervasive ways (i.e. in false ceilings, rafters, boxes, *wherever*; lines 111–13). Critically, however, none of IR's talk about these techniques is addressed specifically to S (until the very end of the turn when the question is asked), but rather they are discussed as general and hypothetical matters that are related to IR's job and what, as a matter of course, is part and parcel of the routine, everyday institutional activities that he engages in on his company's behalf.

Indeed, it might be considered that it is IR who tells a story in the soft accusation encounter, but with an important difference: 'telling about oneself' may draw from a category of one-time events as does the canonical story, but it most typically draws from a category of happenings and 'being-states' that might best be described as ongoing and habitual; these are things about what one *does* and who one *is* (Edwards, 1995). This is accomplished in the segment above, and throughout the telling, via constructions that use the simple present tense, as in 'we use cameras . . .' (line 106); the modal 'can', as in 'we can virtually (0.2) watch any inch of this entire warehouse' (lines 103, 104); as well as in the use of the generalized 'you', as in 'you can put it in false cei:lings' (line 111).

Informing and describing

The above segment, and the ones we examine below, may also be considered for how two interrelated activities come together in the 'telling about oneself' activity, namely, informing and describing. As discussed previously, 'telling about oneself' turns on – that is, is warranted by – a knowledge differential: the teller is telling (i.e. informing) the recipient about things that he or she does not already know about. These are the life activities, associations, identities, habits, experiences, thoughts, feelings, observations and the like that may be used to give a sense to another of 'oneself', and that are selectively conveyed to another through the activity of describing. As is exemplified by IR over the course of telling about himself, describing can be used to depict and elaborate – at least in theory – in infinite detail whatever sorts of objects (events, people, things, etc.) are the focus of a particular interactional moment. Thus, in the above segment we find that IR uses the mention of 'pinhole lenses' to provide an additional component to the unfolding turn construction unit (TCU), an elaboration and authentication of the term through the action of providing an example. IR specifies quite literally a dimension of 'pinhole lenses' (size) that is available in an object at hand by picking up a pen and showing it to S:

- 106 IR: We use cameras that have pinhole
 107 ↑len:ses which (0.3) really the lens
 108 is about the si:ze.hh of this ↑pen
 109 here. ((shows S a pen))
 110 S: °mh hm°=

As can be seen, the action by IR serves to elicit a continuer by S, a 'go ahead' for IR to continue his talk while S suspends his own (Schegloff, 1982). However, as we argue below, S's action – in light of the action that IR is producing in lines 107–9 (an elaboration, a

specification through example) – is also something a little bit more: a show of understanding by S toward IR's explanatory action (Gardner, 2001; Jefferson, 1984a, 1984b).

Techniques of elaboration, as in explaining, specifying, clarifying and so on, are a pervasive feature of IR's telling that are used both as a method of turn expansion by which IR develops and presses his case against S, and as a method of repeatedly invoking the relevance of the knowledge differential between them such that, as instances of informings, IR gets S to align to his talk through displays of understanding, even agreement (see Mazeland, 2004, on how telemarketers solicit opinions from respondents, thereby implicating them in a commercial transaction later in the encounter). This technique works to move IR's talk along such that the participants, S and IR, will end up at a place that is quite different from where they started, that is, at the accusatory question.

Seamless transition from topic to topic

Researchers such as Jefferson (1984b), Sacks (1992), and Schegloff (1996) have noted that talk on a topic can proceed so smoothly to a next topic that the work by which this movement is accomplished is apparently invisible. We find in accord with Schegloff (1996) that a method of topic movement that is employed in the interrogator's long turn is one that is accomplished 'step-by-step' through the addition of new TCUs (i.e. words, phrases, clauses, sentences that can, upon completion, make relevant turn transition to a next speaker; Sacks et al., 1974) and new TCU increments. As we demonstrate, these materials, as they follow one TCU from another, may be built in various ways to show a relationship to a prior TCU, and they may be built to project a relationship to a next TCU. Through what might very generally be glossed as 'tying techniques' (Sacks, 1992), the interrogator stitches together a very long turn that is comprised of a multitude of TCUs and TCU increments that are used to get from one topic to a next, and that make relevant in different ways a subject's alignment to what is being said.

Because the interrogator's talk is so long, we will examine just a few key segments for a closer look at some of these techniques.

Early topic movement: Establishing interrogator's institutional affiliation

Returning to case 'Janitor' of Extract 1, we see that IR produces the preface, 'lemme just tell ya a little bit about myself', and immediately follows it with preface-related talk:

Extract 1: Janitor

- 1 IR: °Alright° (0.4) uhm (.) <lemme just tell
- 2 ya (.) a li:ttle bi:t (.) uhm (.) about
- 3 myse:lf. (0.5) Uh as you saw from the
- 4 document that you si:gned, (0.4) uhhm my
- 5 name's Duane Smith, (.) and I work for
- 6 a firm called Berson, Sherman and
- 7 Associates. (0.2) °Ok[ay°?
- 8 S: [hm hm

In line with the sort of activity that has been projected, IR states his name; then, with the clausal connector ‘and’, he continues with a statement of what firm he works for. ‘And’, of course, is one ubiquitous way that TCUs may be added to. ‘And’ makes visible the new bit of talk as being connected to the prior bit of talk, that is, as relevantly following from it (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Van Dijk, 1979). In this way, IR introduces his institutional affiliation and establishes it as a relevant topic for further talk. Indeed, the talk that he produces next, also introduced with ‘and’, is directed to describing the work that is done at the firm:

- 9 IR: and we (0.2) we do a lot of business,
 10 I think you know (0.5) Simon? (1.0) uhm
 11 we do a lot of business with him and
 12 different properti:es, uh we do a lot
 13 of (0.4) uhm <security work with (0.3)
 14 different apartment buildings and
 15 complexes throughout the city,

Thus, with relatively few moves, IR has used the activity of ‘telling about oneself’ to begin to tell about the sorts of work-related tasks that his firm engages in. Certainly, there is a close relationship between the two activities: that is, ‘telling about one’s job’ falls within the purview of ‘telling about oneself’. However, in telling about his job, IR has made a fairly seamless move away from himself as the focus of his talk, to a focus on what his firm does. The shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’ preserves the continuity of interrogator as the subject-actor in this related activity, but it also begins the work of using telling about his job, particularly through practices of elaboration and intense detailing, to construct a pathway to the accusatory question.

We see one sort of practice of elaboration at work in this stretch of talk. IR produces a descriptive utterance about his job using the broad category terms ‘business’ and ‘properties’ (‘we do a lot of business with him and different properti:es’; lines 11–12), and follows it with another, structurally like TCU that introduces the categories again, but now in terms of their subsidiaries, ‘security work’ and ‘apartment buildings and complexes’ (‘we do a lot of (0.4) uhm <security work with (0.3) different apartment buildings and complexes’, lines 12–15). This practice of elaboration/specification leaves implicit that such work is being done and contrasts with other, more explicit methods that we examine next.

As the interrogator continues with the project of telling about himself, he continues to describe aspects of his job such that each descriptive utterance he makes sets up the possibility for a next descriptive utterance, one that is used in some way to elaborate, to explain, to ‘detail’ the terms set forth in the prior utterance.

‘Intense detailing’ as a method of topic movement

One method of elaboration, of descriptive detailing, that we find involves a ‘chaining’ technique.² The technique involves the interrogator taking a word item from a previous

TCU, positioned at or near TCU end, and bringing it into the next TCU, near that TCU's beginning. As we demonstrate, this next TCU is used to elaborate the carry-over item.

Consider the following extended segment from a case presented earlier, 'Pickup Dock' (Extract 7). The technique that we are interested in begins with the use of the word 'assets' that IR employs as part of the initial description of what his firm does (i.e. just following the statement of his name and institutional affiliation, which is not shown).

Extract 8: Pickup Dock, 6–25

- 6 IR: A:nd (.) we're contracted out by Salem
 7 Furniture to do some things with 'em
 8 basically help protect the assets
 9 of [the ↑company.
 10 S: [mh hm

'Assets' is picked up and brought into the next TCU in what turns out to be an elaboration, a detailing of what 'assets' consist of:

- 11 IR: Now when I say assets (.) what I'm talking
 12 about is the building:, the fixtures,
 13 the merchandise, the cash and the
 14 employees that work here
 15 S: °mh hm°

This TCU provides a list of items, all in the category collection 'assets', and includes 'employees' as the last item in the list (line 14). This last item is then introduced into the next TCU, where an elaboration and evaluation of employees as a particular kind of 'asset' is provided:

- 16 I: Y' know the employees are certainly
 17 the most important a:sset of the company
 18 S: °mh hm°

IR uses the new TCU to invoke, and make a positive claim about, a category to which S belongs, 'employees'. The TCU summarizes a positive relationship between 'employees' and 'assets', items from the previous TCUs, and provides material for a next TCU via the term 'company'. This new TCU, however, is used to produce a rather more sensitive claim about 'companies' and 'losses', one that is beginning to shift the unfolding description toward the topic of wrongful activity:

- 19 IR: °kay°. (.) hhh uhm (0.8) tch
 20 Now (1.2) y' know like (.) a:ll companies,
 21 (0.5) Salem Furniture (.) experiences losses.
 22 S: °mh hm°

The technique that is at work here, take item from last TCU and elaborate in next TCU, has an infinitely recursive quality in that each elaboration of something from a prior TCU is comprised of constituents that can provide new material for a next TCU and, as such, for potentially limitless turn expansion. There is another issue as well, one that has to do with how elaborating is a practice that turns on a knowledge differential, which, as discussed above, is the basis on which ‘telling about oneself’ is undertaken. We consider the above segments again, and further analyze how elaborating subsumes more specific practices for invoking and thus maintaining the relevance of this knowledge differential, practices that, as also mentioned above, serve as alignment devices over the course of IR’s telling.

Formats for elaboration: alignment work

The technique that we are interested in, take item from last TCU and elaborate in next TCU, frequently makes use of formats that make visible that elaboration work is being done. These formats invoke and formulate knowledge differentials between interrogator and subject in different ways.

For example, in lines 11–12, ‘Now when I say assets (.) what I’m talking about is . . .’ uses a format that makes explicit that IR is seeking to get S to understand something, dimensions of ‘assets’ not readily available, it is being implicitly claimed, to S. With this format, IR produces the utterance as a clarification, and with ‘mh hm’ in line 15, S issues something more than just a continuer: he issues a show of understanding.

Another sort of elaboration format is found in line 16 with ‘Y’ know . . .’. ‘You know’, as it is used here in the TCU initial position, precedes a claim, an assertion about a normative state of affairs concerning employees (the last item in the detailing of ‘assets’ of the prior TCU) that positively evaluates them: ‘Y’ know the employees are certainly the most important a:asset of the company’. The claim is produced as unequivocal with the intensifier, ‘certainly’. ‘You know’ underscores the claim as a particular sort of informing, one that reaches toward S’s own base of commonsense knowledge to press a shared orientation to the claim, and to the positive evaluation that is being produced (Ostman, 1981; Schourup, 1985, discussed in Fox Tree and Schrock, 2002: 736). This claim is also met with an ‘mh hm’ by S in line 18 that, in light of the sort of action that it is made with respect to, serves, again, as something more than a continuer, and now as something more than a show of understanding: it serves as an agreement.

‘You know’ works in a similar way in lines 20–21. The claim, ‘Now (1.2) y’know like (.) a:ll companies, (0.5) Salem Furniture (.) experiences losses.’, formulates a claim as a normative state of affairs (‘like all companies’ being key here). The TCU initial ‘y’ know’ produces the claim as part of S’s domain of understandings, and, as in the previous segment, presses for a shared orientation to the claim; it presses for, and gets another ‘mh hm’ in line 22, an agreement.

The analysis that is being advanced here has to do with how IR makes relevant S’s acknowledgments, and thus alignment, to the talk that he is producing, including claims that, as we see in a moment, edge more closely to unfavorable implications for S. As lines 6–22 above show, S produces continuers, which as has been widely discussed (Goodwin, 1986; Jefferson, 1984a; Schegloff, 1982), show a ‘no problem’ orientation to

speaker continuing to speak, typically, TCU by TCU. With continuers, a recipient accepts as adequate a speaker's talk, and foregoes the opportunity to take a turn for him- or herself, for example (in these cases), to speak of how the utterance relates to his or her own business, or to challenge it. The point is that IR, via the use of particular formats for elaboration that are being discussed here, provides for S to do more, that is, to show understanding and even agreement. It is, thus, not that S is simply issuing continuers to a description of IR's job activities and providing a go ahead for him to carry on, but that, as a product of how IR is formulating the description, S is showing positive alignment to the claims that are being forwarded as part of the description. This enables IR to, TCU by TCU, end up at a place that is quite different from where he started, and to bring S along with him.

As the talk continues from line 22 above, IR uses similar techniques of topic movement and elaboration, but rather than taking an item from a prior TCU and introducing it into a next TCU as exactly the same word, IR uses different, related words. For example, we see that 'things' in line 24, a 'prospective indexical', is elaborated and specified with respect to its constituents in line 26, one constituent being 'employee errors' (Goodwin, 1996). The format for doing this work is, 'I mean' at line 25:

- 23 IR: °Okay°, A:nd (0.2) these losses we
 24 know are attributed to.hh several things.
 25 I mean one (0.4) is:: (0.5)
 26 paperwork errors or employee(.).erro[rs=
 27 S: [((nods
 28 head affirmatively))

'I mean' explicitly links something from a prior TCU to something in a next TCU, and it does so as a clarification; it treats something from the prior TCU (things) as being in need of explaining (see Schegloff et al., 1977). By invoking a category to which S unequivocally belongs, 'employee errors' implies just a little bit more the prospect of wrongdoing by S, but nonetheless, gets an agreement, a head nod at lines 27 and 28. As if this response were not enough, though, IR continues with the project of elaborating and specifying just what he means by 'employee errors', but now with the term 'mistakes':

- 29 IR: =I mean we all make mistakes right?
 30 S: [Right
 31 [((vigorously nods head affirmatively))

As we see in line 29, 'I mean' is again used as the format to do elaborating, to do clarifying, but now a little bit differently. As with the turn initial 'you know' discussed above, 'I mean' can also be used to formulate claims (this is not what is being done at line 25). At line 29 IR says, 'I mean we all make mistakes'. Here, the use of an idiomatic expression works to minimize the culpability of employees in making errors, but also, via the idiomatic format invites agreement (along with the tag, 'right?') that, as has been discussed by others, proves to be a difficult format to resist (Kitzinger, 2000). This gets an acknowledgment, a 'Right' at line 30, that, along with a vigorous head nod by S, displays

strong agreement. Thus, we see that IR, having started with a description of his job back in line 8 in which he first introduces the term ‘assets’, has by lines 26 and 29 worked himself closer to an implication of wrongdoing by S with the matter of ‘employee errors’, and in a way that gets S to go along.

As the segment continues, IR begins to transition from claims about lesser, unintentional offenses (errors, mistakes) to claims about stronger, intentional ones: getting ‘merchandise that isn’t paid for’.

Handling misalignment: Preserving the ‘telling’ in the face of subject challenge

As we have discussed, what IR is talking about does not, as it is officially being formulated, apply to S, and should S challenge or resist, S risks the appearance of finding – and thus revealing – too close of a connection to his or her own circumstances. IR’s telling is designed to invoke scenarios for S to make an inferential connection that relates to his or her own circumstances, but, as we have said throughout the article, not to speak to these connections. In only one of our soft accusation cases, the one we have just been examining (‘Pickup Dock’), do we see S articulate, as a question of clarification, how what IR is talking about might be of relevance to him.

As the segment above continues, IR carries on with the issue of ‘mistakes’, now linking it back up to the issue of ‘losses’ (from line 21): ‘the mistakes that we:: (0.4) make result in losses to the company’ (line 34, 35). ‘We’ is a general sort of ‘we’, implicating not just S and IR, but people in general as inadvertently (although perhaps through carelessness) acting to the detriment of a company; in other words, ‘we’ works to spread the matter of culpability around:

- 34 IR: =[sometimes the mistakes that we:: (0.4)
 35 make result in losses to the company.
 36 S: mh hm

From here, however, IR moves in a direction that begins to single out categories of people (customers) who do not inadvertently cause loss, but intentionally do so, as acts of ‘taking advantage’ (line 39), of stealing. This is euphemistically referred to as getting ‘merchandise that’s not paid for’ (lines 41, 42):

- 37 IR: .hh (0.5) Ahm, (0.7) occa:sionally,
 38 there is an opportunity for a customer
 39 to take advantage
 40 S: [mh hm
 41 IR: [.h=of us and get merchandise that’s
 42 not paid fo:r ah walk out with it or
 43 whatever the [case may be.

By focusing on ‘customers’ as the category of offenders, rather than ‘employees’ or S himself, IR works to carefully develop and manage talk that has become more explicitly

directed to the matter of wrongful activity, now as a moral and legal transgression, but by someone other than S. IR's talk is designed to *not* invite talk by S (i.e. by euphemistic word choice, by speaking hypothetically, by speaking as part of an extended telling, etc.), but as we see, S nonetheless interjects:

- 44 S: [So what'd they say
45 I sto:le some merchandise? [or something?

S's interjection is formulated as a candidate understanding of IR's talk (Pomerantz, 1988; Sacks, 1992). It disembeds and exposes the implications of IR's talk for S's own situation: 'so' marks his utterance as a formulation of prior talk (Raymond, 2004; Schifffrin, 1987); 'what'd they say', interestingly, targets the company rather than IR as a possible source of an accusation (IR sets up from the beginning that the encounter is undertaken in the service of 'company business', and, later, that he does 'security work' on behalf of the company); 'I' replaces 'customer', making S the potential wrongdoer; and 'sto:le' retrieves from IR's 'get merchandise that's not paid fo:r' (lines 41, 42) the less euphemistic and clearly sanctionable upshot of the utterance. In other words, S hears IR's talk to be relevant for him, and quite specifically: he hears that he has possibly been accused of stealing.

IR treats S's interjection as an infraction:

- 46 IR: [No no no just
47 S: ah! [hoh! ((laughs))
48 IR: [just [hold on a second and I'll-
49 S: [h=okay! ((laughing))
50 S: huh [huh huh ((laughing)) (cause) ()
51 IR: [you'll see exactly what I'm [getting at.
52 S: [okay
53 IR: (.).hh ↑but yuh know in fact employees
54 (.) sometimes take things.
55 S: [Right
56 [((nods head affirmatively))

First, IR rejects S's candidate formulation with a firm multiple-repeat denial, 'No no no' (line 46) that works to close down the activity that S's talk potentially launches (Stivers, 2003). Then he directs S to cease his line of talk, 'just hold on a second' (line 48), and assures S that the upshot of his own talk will become clear, 'you'll see exactly what I'm [getting at.' (line 51). Of note, however, is that IR resumes his line of talk with an utterance that captures S's hearing of it as an accusation against him: 'but yuh know in fact employees (.) sometimes take things' (lines 53, 54). We see again the use of a TCU initial 'you know', which presses for a shared understanding about a normative state of affairs (employees sometimes take things), claimed as unequivocal with 'in fact'; with 'but', IR counters what he hears in S's interjection as an emergent challenge. The technique works to secure agreement from S, and strongly so. Rather than 'mh hm', S says, 'Right' and makes a pronounced, affirmative head nod (lines 55, 56).

IR's treatment of S's actions as an infraction works to restore the structure of the turn and its topical logic: that is, with IR as the speaker speaking about matters that he has assembled within the frame of 'telling about oneself', and S as the recipient whose contributions are restricted to the issuing of continuers and other such minimal utterances (Lerner, 1992; Maynard, 1980). The segment makes visible the otherwise transparent work that has been undertaken by IR to set up and maintain what is an advantageous speaking arrangement for him, and provides as well a window into the mental life of the subject. As analysts it is impossible not to hear that what IR talks about in the course of telling about himself concerns S and in a way that will not bode well for him or her; but subjects themselves may not – or not without sanction – address or challenge these matters. In this way, 'telling about oneself' makes use of and exploits conversational structures that not only work to align subjects to the case that is implicitly being formulated against them, particularly via formats for elaboration as we have discussed, but also provides the warrant for closing down challenges that intrude on the entitlement to speak at length, and of topics of his choosing, that IR has set up for himself.

Conclusion

In this article, we have described how opportunities to speak in an encounter, and the domains of knowledge and experience over which someone has the authority to disclose, can be a carefully managed enterprise. In the soft accusation method, the interrogator uses the activity of self-disclosure, of 'telling about oneself', to take a long turn at talk. Within this turn, the interrogator subsumes the matter of 'what happened', that is, a depiction of a problem event, as an integral facet of the territory of expertise and experience that is part of his everyday, routine job activities. The activity constrains the subject's talk contributions, and allows the interrogator to speak at length of matters over which he has primary epistemic rights to speak. What pose interactional dilemmas in the story solicitation method – that is, problem forecasting, and the primary speaking and epistemic rights of subjects with respect to *their* positioning as storytellers – are thus strategically reversed.

In concluding, we note that the soft accusation method utilizes basic conversational resources to circumvent, or where it occurs to suppress, subject resistance. The activity of 'telling about oneself' by the interrogator is well-suited for this. 'Telling about oneself' is an activity that has no projectable termination point: one could, in theory at least, talk about one's self forever. It is just this feature of the activity that the interrogator exploits, particularly as it relates to practices of informing and describing. The categories of people, objects, and events upon which description rests can be (also in theory) infinitely detailed, infinitely elaborated upon. More to the point, they can be elaborated upon via techniques that make relevant subject alignment and that make of a subject's continuers and acknowledgments something more: displays of understanding and even agreement.

In sum, 'telling about oneself' works as a method of preparing subjects to accept the presuppositions embedded in the accusatory question that we showed at the outset. It does so by keeping subjects in a prolonged recipient position, not only for taking in without challenge or resistance the mounting implications of the interrogator's talk for their own circumstances, but also for going along with those implications. Thus, even though

subjects may grasp the ‘real’ implications of what they are involved in, the structure of the self-disclosure activity forecloses opportunities for them to resist or otherwise act in their own best interests, making of them by the time the accusatory question is asked rather compliant answerers.

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Appendix: Transcription Conventions

Talk is represented using Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004).

IR	Interrogator
S	Subject
[overlapping talk
=	continuous talk
(0.2)	silence in tenths of a second
(.)	micropause
.	final intonation
?	rising intonation
,	continuing intonation
!	animated tone
:	prolongation of the preceding sound
we-	cut-off of the preceding sound
<u>you</u>	emphasis
THAT	loud talk
◦	very quiet talk
↑	rise in pitch
↓	fall in pitch
> <	talk is compressed
< >	talk is slowed
<	talk starts with a rush
hh	aspiration
.hh	inhalation
((laughs))	transcriber’s comments
()	problematic, uncertain, or alternative hearings
(...)	lines are deleted
→	points to the relevant lines of transcript

Notes

1. We use the term ‘subject’ rather than ‘suspect’ because persons who are subject to this type of interrogation are not identified as such up front in the encounter. The term also emphasizes the discourse aspect of the encounter. To be consistent, we also use it when discussing police criminal interrogations.
2. We would like to thank Gene Lerner for supplying us with this term.

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